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THE PRIVATE DUTY NURSE AND HER WORK¹

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I think that all private duty nurses agree with me that the great, good women who have given and still are giving their lives so nobly in service and succor to suffering humanity and who have contributed and still are contributing so magnificently towards making the nursing profession what it is, are to us the embodiment of the ideal nurse, a fair vision ever before us. Although many of us have striven for years to attain some of the heights on the way to her realm of achievement, yet some of us, my humble self included, still find ourselves this side of the half-way mark. However, we are not discouraged, for the vision of our ideal beckons to us as a guiding beacon, inspiring us with ever fresh strength, fresh courage, fresh zest to overcome the numerous obstacles which we encounter almost daily in our pathway, and so we are tireless in our efforts, patiently striving to reach our goal, impelled by the desire to accomplish things worth while, to make every day count in our work and to make our work such as to enable us to feel that we are not wasting our lives, but that we are finding comfort and happiness in the knowledge that in our deeds we are giving relief, comfort and happiness to others.

In the beginning of the world's history, work was considered the symbol of man's punishment. Since then it has become the secret of man's happiness.

Work thou for pleasure. Paint or sing or carve
The thing thou lovest, though the body starve.
Who works for glory misses oft the goal;
Who works for money coins his very soul.
Work for the work's sake then, and it may be
That these things shall be added unto thee.

We realize that the present progressive era and all its modern movements, which continually open new fields of interest to women, also open new avenues of activity to the trained nurse. It therefore becomes essential to broaden our view point and to develop our mentality in every direction in which progress is changing conditions. To be successful as individuals, as well as an organization, we must have the right perspective of existing conditions of the present time, taking cognizance

¹ Read at a meeting of the Virginia State Nurses' Association.

of the possibilities of the future, in which we are guided by our experiences of the past.

Efficiency is indeed indispensable in every phase of our work, and in its train follow with equal importance economy, adaptability, tact, patience, perseverance, etc. In order to find our work crowned with success, it must be conscientiously and well done, even to every minute detail. In our daily efforts we must constantly seek opportunities to perfect ourselves, always bearing in mind that life is a training school for all mankind, in which we learn wisdom and gain knowledge day by day, making the most of the great Master's blessings, to His glory and honor.

Some few of us make the great fundamental mistake of being, generally speaking, constantly on the alert for what we can get out of life. We think that life owes it to us to yield us a certain amount of pleasure and enjoyment, and never give a serious thought as to what we are putting into life; whether we are giving the very best that is in us, giving it generously, without reserve, so as to be true blessings to those whom we serve in a professional capacity, as well as to those with whom we associate in private life.

The majority of us, after finishing an excellent course of three or four years' training, become private duty nurses. During our period of hospital training we devoted ourselves diligently to the study of various branches of medicine, besides receiving with aptitude the best practical instruction in the art of nursing, but as we enter upon our career of private duty nursing, we are chiefly called to the home. Then we find the splendid methods we acquired at the hospital and which proved to be entirely adequate there, have to be modified and adjusted to home conditions in order to be practicable. We find too that to dive into the mysteries of human nature, a study for which we find ample opportunity, becomes almost imperative.

As we enter a home, no matter whether it happens to be a mansion or a hut, it is, as a rule, to our advantage to observe the conditions, the circumstances, the atmosphere, the attitude of the people of that home. It is just as important to ascertain the patient's state of mind and temperament as it is to minister to the needs and comforts of the body. The patient's family occasionally proves to be a most trying factor to deal with and even the servants, if there are any, come in for consideration. Besides, the attending physician must be given evidence that we are worthy of his confidence. In coming into the midst of a household we ought to use much tact and discretion so as to avoid giving the impression that we are a foreign element, a stranger with strange ways. Rather, we should cause the family to feel

that we have come as a friend, to comfort, to help, to cheer; that it is our mission, our pleasure, to render assistance where we can and to help to lighten their burden without causing any disorganization; thus we may use our influence unobtrusively to bring the home conditions as far as possible, under the circumstances, to a normal state, though this is sometimes a difficult task to accomplish under adverse circumstances.

And oh, the homes of the needy, where it is oftentimes almost impossible to procure necessary supplies and comforts for the patient, especially when out in the country! Occasionally a nurse finds two, three, or four sick people in such a home. In many instances we are obliged to resort to all kinds of improvising, our resourcefulness and originality being taxed to full capacity. No doubt many of us have exercised our ingenuity along this line until we feel that we might be entitled to a patent on some of our inventions, or in other cases to a medal for the heroism which we are sometimes called upon to display without being conscious of it as such, or having it recognized as such by others. From personal experience I have, in various instances, found it necessary to scrub floors and furniture, usually the first thing after giving the patient the most necessary treatment and attention, to wash the patient's bed-clothes and towels, or when there was practically no bed linen, etc., to procure and use such suitable rags as I could find. Often I have found that unless I did the cooking there would be no food fit for any human being to eat and in one instance I actually milked the cow. Again I have screened windows and doors with mosquito netting (which I usually had to procure with my own money); improvised all kinds of sanitary measures so as to render my own existence and that of members of the household fairly safe from contamination; contrived refrigerators with boxes and sawdust; devised various appliances for treatments, such as steam baths and hot packs; fought all kinds of vermin; built fires and carried wood or whatever could be used as fuel; and done many little things which it takes too much time to tell. I know that every private nurse has had similar experiences.

There are so many homes where unsanitary, filthy conditions, poverty and destitution exist, largely due to ignorance and mismanagement. Here we can use our influence to stimulate in people the desire and ambition to practice system and economy as well as cleanliness and sanitation in their daily lives and surroundings. A good influence often works wonders if tactfully and judiciously exerted.

There is one thing we must avoid by all means, and that is gossip. We should avoid as much as possible talking on nursing subjects or telling patients, their families, or friends about former patients, their

homes or ailments. I have found that patients, as soon as they are convalescent, as well as members of their family, are sociable and love to talk to the trained nurse, sometimes asking her to tell them of experiences she has had with former patients, etc., which no doubt might be quite entertaining to some people and occasionally even thrilling. However, I try not to let people lead me into talking "nurses' experiences," but I feel that since convalescent patients as well as members of their family, like, as a rule, to talk to the nurse, she should be able to converse intelligently on all subjects that might be of interest to them and also prove herself an interested and sympathetic auditor. I am always very glad to give people any information or advice that they may wish pertaining to their comfort, health, house-keeping, or any other subject in which I can help them; in turn I like to make them feel that I, too, am learning from them, that I am interested in them and their surroundings. I must confess that thus I have enriched my humble store of meagre knowledge, have broadened my vision of life's horizon and I trust that I may be granted the privilege of doing so further.

A nurse's ability to apply herself easily to every condition, to be able to fit into every setting on life's stage, is her greatest asset, but it stands to reason that this is not always very easy to accomplish. To live and serve under trying and strange conditions, as is frequently the case, and to retain our equilibrium and amiable frame of mind taxes our strength and endurance considerably, and it requires a great deal of fortitude, firm determination, and high resolve to carry through the task before us with kindness and sympathy until finished, without giving way to our natural inclination, which would be the desire to give up and go home. It is, therefore, very important to get sufficient time off duty, not only for needed rest, but also for mental relaxation. To readjust our mental balance is as necessary as to rest our weary bodies, but to obtain sufficient rest is the greatest problem the private duty nurse has to face. Occasionally it is impossible for her to leave her case at all, in instances where there is no one in the family who can relieve her, even for a little while. It is indeed trying to render efficient service when one's system is poisoned with fatigue, and as ours is a work fraught with grave responsibilities, we should make every effort to obtain sufficient rest both physical and mental to render us fit to perform our duties to the satisfaction of ourselves and of others. In this connection people are sometimes thoughtless. They do not mean to be inconsiderate, but in their anxiety and worry over loved ones they forget that the nurse also is human and requires sleep and relaxation. When on duty in a hospital, or when people are able to have two nurses

for a dangerously ill patient, such problems do not arise, yet few people especially in the country, are able to have more than one nurse; in many instances they really are not able to have even one without making many sacrifices; again, if they really are able, they feel that they are doing their part amply in employing the one and sometimes she is expected to nurse the whole family. It is, however, very often our privilege to enter homes where it is a joy to serve and to meet those with whom it is a pleasure to be so closely associated. We feel like ministering to them with our heart in every deed and know ourselves to be better women for having known them. Very often they remain our best and staunchest friends through life and we derive much happiness and help from such pleasing associations. These are some of the bright scenes, the high places in our career.

Most people are of the opinion that the private duty nurse is well paid, but if one considers from a business standpoint that we practically work both night and day on most cases; that it requires three and four years' training, besides first obtaining a good general education, to fit ourselves for our profession; that we only last about ten years as a private duty nurse; that we are obliged to lose time, sometimes much time, between cases; that we cannot depend on a fixed income from our work, then our compensation may be considered very small.

However, we should and could be more careful as to how we spend our income. We ought to be more systematic in saving, more economical in living. There is no doubting the fact that some of us are extravagant and to some degree wasteful. Each one ought to have a savings account of some kind. I have made a rule for myself that no matter how small my income, I don't quite spend it all. I keep a monthly account of all my expenditures, as well as my income, and at the close of each year I balance my little book and know exactly where I stand as far as bread and butter is concerned, how much I can and ought to give to my church, etc. I found during my first two years of private duty nursing that, although I was kept busy, I did not save a penny nor contribute to church, missions, nor any charitable cause. I could not account for much of the money I had spent, so I resorted to a little book-keeping and it has aided me greatly in keeping my expenses at a minimum, as well as in saving a little each year and in having something to give. Many of us are unbusiness-like and have no system about our mode of living. I think every woman who works for a living, whether she be dependent upon it or not, and every house-keeper ought to live on a business basis. Some of us claim that we can spend and do with our income just as it pleases us; that it concerns no

one but ourselves. However, when rainy days come along, and they are likely to come into everybody's life, we think it concerns everyone to help take care of us, if we are not able to do so ourselves. Every nurse ought to look ahead and guard against being absolutely penniless, should sickness and misfortune overtake her. Those who have others dependent on them find it almost impossible to save anything above their living expenses, therefore all who are so situated should at least have sick benefit insurance for protection in case of illness. I took out insurance soon after I graduated and I have never regretted it, but have found much comfort in the sense of its protection.

We find that our foremost statesmen and educators are continually trying out new methods whereby they may obtain a more economical and efficient form of government, better legislation, better laws. Our leading business men and financiers are adopting better business methods, in which efficiency, economy, and expert training play a very important part; this all makes for a more efficient and economical mode of living. Unless some of us who are private duty nurses make stronger efforts in practicing economy, both in our professional work and in our private life, we shall eventually find ourselves sadly out of harmony with the rest of the world.

To summarize, in order to fill some of the modern requirements of the competent and successful nurse, we must be efficient, must practice economy conscientiously, both in our patients' and in our own interests, adapt ourselves to circumstances and conditions, and must serve our fellow-man in humility and loving kindness.

Life hath its cares,
And whoso bears
 The burden of its years,
Until the end must hourly blend
 Its laughter with its tears.